

TCC's Quarterly Community Newsletter Summer, 2001

TCC Special Report

Disability Concerns

IN THIS SUMMER 2001 ISSUE

- TCC Special Report on Disability Concerns - pp. 1 - 4
- Step Up to the Plate for Tempe's Help to Other's Charity Baseball Event - pg. 5
- Affordable Housing for Seniors Available - pg. 6
- Thomas J. Pappas School for Homeless Children Opens in Tempe - pg. 7
- 15 Minutes of Fame - pg. 8

Many of us, at some point in our lives, will be faced with some type of a disability. According to the National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research, nearly one in five people (or 19.4%) have a disability, making this group by far the largest minority population in the country. In addition, nearly one-third (29.2%) of families have at least one member with a disability. *Here in Tempe, an estimated 10,600 people live with a disability, according to a 1996-97 Maricopa County phone survey.* Clearly, this is an issue that touches, or will touch, the vast majority of us in some way; and yet, people with

disabilities continue to face economic, social and physical barriers that often hinder their ability to fully integrate into mainstream work and social life.



The 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) acknowledged that people with

disabilities are no different from able-bodied

people in their desire to be full participants in everyday life, in their ability to contribute to the social and economic life of the nation when barriers are removed and in their basic human right to be given that opportunity. A survey cited in *Disability Watch* indicated that two-thirds of the disabled adults who responded reported that their "quality of life" has improved since enactment of the ADA.

Although much progress has been made in the past decade, statistics indicate that people with disabilities continue to face economic hardships and social isolation in rates that far exceed the non-disabled population. We must all be vigilant in both our actions and attitudes to ensure that progress continues in reducing or eliminating barriers preventing people with disabilities from being full, active and productive participants in every aspect of community life.

Nearly 49 million Americans have a disability. Of that number, almost half (24.1 million people) can be considered to have a severe disability. U.S. Department of Education, National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research, 1996

Each year, the Maricopa Association of Governments (MAG) publishes a *Human Services Plan for Maricopa County* to prioritize areas of need and to make recommendations regarding the expenditure of Social Services Block Grant Funds. As part of this process the MAG Human Services Committee has developed several priority problem areas that require continued action and resources. Those priority problems for persons with disabilities are listed below.

MAG PRIORITY PROBLEMS OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

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| #1 A need for more and better coordinated services, such as employment, training, transportation, affordable and accessible housing, attendant/personal care and dental care. |
| #2 Lack of transportation. |
| #3 Lack of information, training, skills or assistance to access services. |
| #4 Limited access to social and recreational programs. |
| #5 A need for early information and intervention at onset of disability. |
| #6 Limited access to public and private buildings due to non-compliance with the ADA. |
| #7 Lack of sensitivity and peer mentoring in the workplace. |

A few of these issues are expounded on in greater detail below, along with examples of some of the positive steps that are being taken in an effort to improve opportunities for those who live with a disability.

Employment Concerns

According to a 1994 Harris poll, 79% of people with disabilities without jobs said that they would prefer to be working. However, the unemployment rate for people with disabilities is 13.4%, more than twice that of the general population. This figure represents those individuals who are actively looking for work. The vast majority of individuals with a work disability--67.9%-- are not even in the labor force, which means that they are neither employed nor seeking employment. **This contributes greatly to the fact that 30% of the 16.9 million people with a work disability live below the federal poverty level.**

Here in Arizona, approximately 77,000 people currently draw Social Security disability benefits, with the average benefit amounting to \$760 per month. It is estimated that for every one percent of people with disabilities who work, \$3 billion is saved over the long term. It is clearly in all of our best interest to increase work opportunities for individuals with disabilities; however, significant barriers to employment remain.

Some common barriers to employment faced by people with disabilities are: (1) employer attitudes, (2) physical barriers, (3) lower levels of education, skills and experience often caused by prior discrimination, and (4) societal attitudes. Some employers believe that people with disabilities cannot handle a regular job, will be absent from work often or that necessary accommodations will be excessively expensive. While the ADA prohibits discrimination on the basis of disability in all employment practices, these types of attitudes continue to persist.

We are fortunate in Tempe to be the home of The Centers for Habilitation (TCH). Since 1967, TCH has been dedicated to providing a continuum of services that promote personal well-being, self-determination and societal integration for persons with disabilities. TCH works with approximately 850 individuals with developmental and physical disabilities each year, helping each to reach his or her full potential. Through their supported employment programs (see sidebar), TCH has provided job training, work adjustment, on-site support and job coaches to enable many of Tempe's citizens with limited cognitive skills to earn real wages, develop important social and life skills and to gain self-confidence. Employment programs at TCH have been a great asset both to Tempe and all of Arizona in enabling individuals with disabilities to integrate more fully into society. The City of Tempe has funded TCH in the amount of \$20,000 for the 2001/2002 fiscal year.

Supported Employment

Supported employment is an innovative concept that provides assisted, competitive employment for people with certain disabilities, in particular mental retardation, developmental disabilities, and mental illness. On-the-job and other assistance is provided to workers who would not otherwise be able to take on mainstream jobs. In supported employment "job coaches" go to the workplace to provide extra guidance and training and to consult with the employer about problems that may develop. Workers receive the same wage and benefits that any other non-disabled worker would receive. Nationally, supported employment programs have proven to be quite successful. According to a study mentioned in *Disability Watch*, 70% of disabled workers at all levels of mental retardation retained their jobs for at least one year. Nationwide, supported employment programs have enabled 105,000 individuals with severe disabilities gain real wages for real work, and perhaps equally important, gain the social benefit and self-worth that accompanies satisfying employment.

The Governor's Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities is in the process of developing a Business Leadership Network (BLN), making Arizona one of only fifteen states to have such a program. Member companies of the BLN are committed to diversity in the workplace, including employing qualified people with disabilities. The purpose of the BLN is to provide a means by which employer needs are matched with qualified persons with disabilities; to develop, implement and share best employment practices regarding the selection, development and retention of persons with disabilities; and to educate and promote sensitivity and disability awareness to Arizona employers. The network includes Arizona businesses and twenty-seven agencies that serve people with disabilities. A website will be up and running in the near future and an official kick-off event will be held in the Fall. Kathleen Green, a member of the Tempe Commission on Disability Concerns, represents Tempe on the Governor's Committee. Kathleen also works for Motorola and has been instrumental in helping to establish the BLN and in enlisting Motorola as a prime sponsor.

Transportation Concerns

As indicated above, transportation remains a significant need for people with disabilities. The following table, using data from a recently completed MAG “Special Transportation Needs Study” shows the growth in numbers of individuals with a mobility limitation in Maricopa County and in Tempe. Although data from the 2000 census is not yet available, we can expect those numbers to have continued to increase significantly.

Area	Mobility Limited			
	1990 Census		Estimated 1995	
	Mobility Limited	% of total population	Mobility Limited	% of total population
Tempe	2,403	1.7%	3,384	2.2%
Maricopa Co.	56,942	2.7%	80,192	3.1%

One of the goals of Tempe’s transit program is to provide a balanced transportation system that is accessible to all Tempe residents, employees and visitors. Since 1996, when Tempe voters approved a sales tax to improve transit service, the City has implemented a number of programs to make transit services accessible, including:

- ordering new buses to create a fully accessible (low-floor) and alternatively fueled fleet;
- improving bus stops and curb cuts for accessibility (more than 80 percent of Tempe’s bus stops currently meet or exceed the Americans with Disabilities Act design standards – up from just over 50 percent two years ago);
- planned improvements to bus stop signage;
- implementing a disability awareness training and secret rider program as a mechanism for user input and training of drivers;
- implementing neighborhood circulator and other free shuttle routes as an alternative for short trips.



In addition, accessibility has been identified as a goal of the Central Phoenix/East Valley Light Rail Transit Program, as part of the Urban Design Guidelines.

The City of Tempe Commission on Disability Concerns

Disabilities, to promote business and citizen involvement in employment of those with disabilities. In 1986, Tempe Community Council began co-sponsoring the Committee, along with the City, by providing staffing and other support for committee activities. At that time, the group’s mission was broadened to include all disability concerns, and the committee helped the City of Tempe to implement the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). The group worked with Tempe Community Services to plan for parks and recreational activities for Tempe’s disabled population, including the establishment of an award-winning accessible ramada at Kiwanis Park and the Escalante Community Center (which actually exceeds ADA requirements). In recent years, the Commission has published an informational brochure on parking compliance in spaces reserved for people with disabilities and has produced a handicapped notification windshield placard. The Commission has also worked on disability transportation issues; has successfully advocated for the establishment of a new Therapeutic Recreation Coordinator position within the City of Tempe, and has consulted with the City on the Rio Salado development project.

Mission Statement: “To advocate disability issue awareness, equal access and full community integration and to seek resolution of the concerns of people with disabilities for the benefit of all the people of Tempe.”

Through the Access and Barrier Free Environment Subcommittee, the Commission is able to seek voluntary compliance with the ADA and City of Tempe ordinances concerning parking for people with disabilities and facility accessibility relating to public and private buildings in Tempe. Upon receipt of a concern or complaint, the group visits the facility in question. If a problem is substantiated, written communication is made with facility managers seeking changes and offering help to do so.



Richard Nolan, Chair of the Commission on Disability Concerns and Gary Venjohn, Access Employment Coordinator at Arizona State University at the Mayor's Awards for Employment of People with Disabilities.

The Commission has also established the Mayor's Awards Planning Subcommittee responsible for planning the annual Mayor's Awards. Each year since 1988, the Commission has sponsored an awards event to honor exceptional employees with disabilities, employers of disabled individuals and others who have shown exceptional dedication to disability issues and improving the quality of life of all of Tempe's citizens with disabilities. It is hoped that such recognition will stimulate others to emulate those recognized and appreciate the positive opportunities of hiring those with physical and developmental disabilities.

The following individuals serve Tempe as members of the Commission on Disability Concerns: Bernadette Croy, Manuel and Laura Delci, Nicholas Enoch, Michael Franjevic, Kathleen Green, David Hekking, John Horne III, Deiedre Leisure, Irene Mochel, Richard Nolan, Carol Payant, Linda Redman, Sally Stewart and Karen Walters. Robert Barber, Jack Lofgren, Mike Lins and Jody Sharpe recently left the Commission due to term limits after many years of productive and dedicated service.

Agencies That Serve People with Disabilities

There are many social service agencies throughout the Valley and Arizona that provide assistance in a variety of ways to enable people with disabilities to live active and fulfilling lives. Assistance provided ranges from helping individuals navigate through the process of

applying for social security benefits, transitioning from government assistance to self sufficiency, organizing recreation and social activities and providing support and housing modifications to enable individuals who might otherwise have to live in a group setting to live independently. Through the annual agency review process administered by Tempe Community Council, the following social service agencies provide services for people with disabilities. The total amount of City of Tempe human service funding allocated in FY 2001/2002 for these agencies was \$89,653.

- Advocates for the Disabled
- ARC of Tempe
- Assistance for Independent Living
- The Centers for Habilitation (TCH)
- Tempe Adult Day Health Care
- Valley Center for the Deaf

BOTTOM LINE

Everyday, all across America, individuals with disabilities demonstrate that their "limitations" are merely challenges that they face and overcome with courage, dignity and with great success. Often, the greatest challenges faced by people with disabilities are not those caused directly by their individual disabilities, but are rather those imposed by the external environment in which they live and work.

The Americans with Disabilities Act acknowledged the discriminatory effects of architectural, transportation, and communication barriers in preventing full economic and social participation in community life, but progress in removing those barriers is slow. Even so, changes to the external environment are sometimes easier to achieve than changes to peoples' attitudes.

Clearly, much has been and continues to be done--through all levels of government and social service agencies--to improve the quality of life of those with disabilities. It's incumbent on us all, however, to be vigilant of the challenges faced by people with disabilities and continue to work toward ensuring that equal access and opportunity are achieved.